

Farm Bill Forum Testimony
Wisconsin State Fairgrounds
West Allis, Wisconsin

Thursday, August 4, 2005

Prepared by James L. Gibson, Ph.D., Verona, Wisconsin

Encouraging Closer Look: Agricultural Education

Mr. Secretary, thanks for this opportunity to have input into the process that will lead to proposals to be considered in the next comprehensive farm/agricultural legislation and appropriations at the federal level. I am here today as an individual, having taken personal leave time from my regular job to be here. What I wish to discuss today is education in and about agriculture.

The investments made by USDA in rural development, farm programs, conservation, environmental stewardship, forestry and forest products, agricultural research facilities, rural health, research, extension and outreach and investments made in dairy/livestock industry revitalization are very much appreciated and so essential to the people of our state. However, we must also recognize the human resource needs to help this state live up to its potential as a leading supplier of the many commodities and special products so vital to our state and our nations well being.

In Wisconsin, we are experiencing declining school-age populations in most rural Wisconsin counties. In general, fewer young people who have traditional farm backgrounds are going to be available to enter the educational system and become prepared for the outstanding opportunities that can be there for them. Certainly the workforce, ownership and the leadership in agriculture and related industries in Wisconsin will be different in the world in which we can now predict 5, 10 and 15 years ahead.

USDA has, for years, been a major force in so many aspects of the lives of people in Wisconsin, across the country and around the world. Now is a time when the Department can have an even greater roll in helping create a climate that also supports innovations in education that cut across the barriers that have been erected in the past. School-based

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agricultural education and 'informal' educational programming through the department and its state and local partners have been decidedly apart in design and accountability.

The principles and practices rooted in organic legislation creating Extension and Vocational Education in the early part of the of the last century, should be revisited. Opportunities do exist to establish and support creative partnerships between the department and its agencies and local schools and two-year colleges that can match and even exceed the value to this nation that the long partnerships with land-grant colleges and universities have continued to enjoy for the better part of this past century.

Your administration should be encouraged to consider, as it puts together its next set of legislative proposals, continuation of the competitive grants programs, housed within Science and Education in REE/ Higher Education, aimed at vitalization and collaboration in attracting the best an brightest young people to enter and prepare for science-based careers in the agricultural, food and natural resources systems. The department should continue to encourage youth leadership development through 4-H and FFA and to be visible to young people considering their career choices.

Further, all administrative units within USDA should be encouraged to be aggressive in encouraging its own staff and partners within the states, including the land-grant universities, to engage in meaningful shared programming that leads to improvements in utilization of all (including state and local) public resources for the benefit of young people, including those who are disadvantaged and those who are a part of the new workforce. The work force that will clearly dominate our potential for growth in agricultural productivity, food and fiber-related manufacturing and service businesses in the years ahead will be different than in the recent past. We need to be doing our best to be sure we have attracted and prepared the next generation for the opportunities that without them will not be possible.

Mr. Secretary, I would be pleased to respond to questions, but even more pleased to work with you and the department in identifying specific initiatives that may have potential for helping us all realize a time when individuals who can directly or indirectly benefit from a healthy and productive agricultural, food and natural resources system are at the center of our consciousness.

Thank you.

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In Wisconsin, we are experiencing declining school-age population in rural counties. In general, fewer young people who have traditionally been available to enter the educational system are taking advantage of the opportunities that can be there for them. The lack of leadership in agriculture and related industries is a concern which we can now predict 5, 10 and 15 years from now.

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